



*King and Emperor:
A New Life of Charlemagne*

Janet L. Nelson

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King and Emperor: A New Life of Charlemagne. By Janet L. Nelson. London: Allen Lane; Oakland: University of California Press, 2019. ISBN 978-0-71-399243-4. xxxvi + 668 pp. £30.00.

The subject of this book is Charles, king of the Franks and the Lombards, and patrician of the Romans (and later *imperator augustus*), not Charlemagne, *Karolus magnus*, Karl der Große, Carlomagno. While this might seem to be a minor detail, it constantly reminds the reader that the man studied in this book was precisely that—a man—and, as such, was liable to both successes and failures. Janet Nelson’s new book presents the life of Charles, unencumbered by a presupposition of greatness. Nelson offers the reader the fascinating story of a man whose circumstances and decisions led him to hold a vast territory and be crowned emperor at the turn of the ninth century.

Anyone who has studied the life of Charles has been forced to face the subject matter by themes, rather than chronologically. This trend was set as early as the ninth century by Einhard, the first in a long list of biographers of the man who is commonly known (in English) as Charlemagne. One of the many achievements of Nelson’s new book is that she breaks with this tradition and approaches her subject “chronologically, following Charles’s life as he lived it, and as we all live our lives—in hope but also in ignorance of what would or could follow a given perception, decision or act” (4).

This is a long book, but the narrative has been skilfully broken down into, first, the different stages of Charles’ life and, second, within those, into episodic sections, which make it easy for the reader to pause without losing the narrative thread. A practical downside of the printed edition is that, given its length, it is somewhat inconvenient to have endnotes rather than footnotes. Nevertheless, this is something that will not affect those readers who opt for the electronic version.

The use of visual aids is a key feature of this book. Maps, charts, and genealogies complement the conversational tone of the narrative. Maps in particular are especially relevant in a work of this sort. There are fifteen in total, and they not only help the reader to visualise the extent of Charles’ kingdoms or the distance between two palaces, for example, but they also bring to the fore important issues that are seldom considered, such as topography, roads, and Alpine passes. These add to the reader’s understanding of the geographical landscape during Charles’ life. Their inclusion was a sound decision.

While Charles is, of course, the main focus of Nelson’s book, he did not spend his life in a vacuum, devoid of human contact. Therefore, the men and women who were close to Charles and had an influence on his life also

have an important place in the narrative, not least because they provide invaluable context in which to set the main character. In this regard, the case of the women in Charles' life is of particular value. Nelson's careful study of the sources shows that they were never in the background. The reader will find Charles taking counsel from his mother, making important decisions together with his wives, and displaying genuine love and concern for the women in his family. These accounts home in on the portrayal of Charles as a man rather than as a legend.

King and Emperor is a masterpiece in its use of sources and source criticism. Nelson has embarked on the monumental quest of evaluating every shred of evidence that can shed light on who Charles was, and on his personality. No stone is left unturned: the breadth of material ranges from the more formal charters and royal diplomas to passing anecdotes in minor annals, and even to the much-neglected poetry of the period. Yet all this information is presented in an approachable fashion and with a light tone. Every piece of evidence fits within the narrative and the reader is never left with unprocessed information.

This is perhaps the greatest success of Nelson's book. Because the evidence is so clearly presented and the story follows so naturally, her work is sure to appeal to experts and non-experts alike. Only until the readers have put the book down will they realise how much they have learnt, not only about Charles, but also about the time period in general. And for the experts on the subject, there are hints in the narrative that will nudge them to go back to the sources and re-assess them. Most importantly, however, she has produced a book that is enjoyable to read.

Nelson's chronological, rather than thematic, approach comes as a breath of fresh air, after a long list of books on the subject. She set out to find Charles' personality and, in this reader's opinion, she has succeeded. Overall, *King and Emperor* is a welcome addition to the field of Carolingian studies in particular, and to medieval studies in general.

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